

Appreciative Leadership and Participatory Planning

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*“The task of leadership is to align strengths in such a way that weaknesses are irrelevant”
Management Guru, Peter Drucker*

The foundation of leadership as it has been practiced for decades is cracking. No longer do the bricks and mortar of command and control create solid ground for organizing and directing the energy and effort of people. New millennium processes for organization and community development such as inclusive dialogue among stakeholders, collaborative inquiry, and participatory planning have chipped away at the old practices of leadership and are loudly calling out for new ones.

Appreciative Leadership is uniquely suited to answer this call. Derived from the principles and practices of Appreciative Inquiryⁱ appreciative leadership is a relational process for bringing out the best of people, organizations and communities. The purpose of this brief essay is to introduce appreciative leadership as a viable model of leadership for participatory planning.

Whether you turn to the dictionary or Wikipedia seeking to define of leadership, the most common definition is “a person or process that provides guidance and direction.” Appreciative leadership is a process that is uniquely affirmative. As such it provides direction and guidance toward that which is most positive and life affirming. Drs. Diana Whitney and James Ludema define appreciative leadership as:

“The capacity to engage others in discovering, magnifying, and connecting all that is good and healthy in people and the world around them--- in such a way that deepens relatedness, inspires transformational conversations, and mobilizes cooperative action toward life affirming social innovations.”ⁱⁱ

As the definition suggests, appreciative leadership makes a positive difference. By discovering, magnifying and connecting life affirmative potential appreciative leadership fosters the creation of social innovations in support of a better world. The five practices of appreciative leadership are highly congruent with successful participatory planning. They can be summarized as: inclusion, inquiry, illumination, inspiration and integrity.

Five Practices of Appreciative Leadership

1. **Appreciative Leadership is Inclusive.** The people whose future it is are engaged in co-creating the future. Appreciative leaders ask, “Who else needs to be in this discussion? How can we engage all of our stakeholders? Who has previously been silent that needs to be heard? What are the many voices that constitute our organization or community?”

When participatory planning includes all stakeholders a transformation occurs. There is a shift from a few with authority creating the future and “rolling it out” to “full voice authoring” of the future. Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, authors of *Future Search*, say that people commit to what they help create. Appreciative leadership invites commitment through inclusion.

2. **Appreciative Leadership is Inquiry Based.** Recognizing that human organizations and communities grow in the direction of what they study, Appreciative leaders embed values in the questions they ask. Appreciative Inquiry teaches that the questions we ask are fateful. Appreciative leaders ask affirmative questions about the things most valued and wanted. In this way they focus learning and development on what the organization or community wants to be, rather than the problems they want to overcome.

In the process of participatory planning Appreciative leaders asks questions to uncover stories of high point experiences, to reveal images of the future, and to articulate compelling actions for organization and community transformation. In this way participants are guided through a strengths based approach to planning.

3. **Appreciative Leadership Illuminates the Best of People, Processes, Organizations and Communities.** Appreciative leaders express appreciative intelligence by directing dialogue and inquiry toward assets and strengths. Professor, Tojo Thatchenkery and Consultant, Carol Metzker define appreciative intelligence as “The ability to perceive the positive inherent generative potential within the present. Put in a simple way, appreciative intelligence is the ability to see the mighty oak in the acorn.”ⁱⁱⁱ Appreciative leaders have a bias for strengths and seek to help others discover and magnify inherent potential. As the quote by Peter Drucker suggests, appreciative leadership is about the alignment of strengths so that weaknesses are irrelevant.

Strengths based participatory planning builds individual and collective confidence among organization and community members. Chilean Organizational Consultant, Carlos Aguilera Muga realized that a group of community women he was working with had strong visions and little confidence in their own abilities to achieve their visions. When he had them interview each other to uncover and define their individual and collective strengths he watched their confidence soar. The process of “strengths spotting”^{iv} gave these women an opportunity to recognize their inherent abilities to achieve their most cherished vision – better lives for their children.

- 4. Appreciative Leadership Inspires Hope.** Much is written about the importance of vision. Confidence and hope that the vision can be realized is of equal importance as the vision itself. Without hope people tend to lack enthusiasm, energy, commitment, and persistence. Positive change requires a great deal of positive energy and emotions: confidence, hope, belief, creativity and persistence. Appreciative leaders inspire hope by ensuring that visions are supported by a clear path forward and a collective sense of efficacy. They do this by engaging others in the process from vision to action.

Appreciative leadership guided participatory planning guided engages people in a process that includes the discovery of strengths, the articulation of images of the future, a vision and path forward, and the allocation of resources needed for implementation and successful realization of the vision. Appreciative Inquiry based positive change leads to successful participatory planning.

- 5. Exemplifies Relational Integrity.** The inclusion of multiple stakeholders demands that appreciative leaders value and understand diversity; that they encourage and find ways to create harmony among differences; and that they define success as “everyone wins.” Relational integrity challenges appreciative leaders to be sure that all voices are heard and that all people are “whole” in the process and with the results. Whenever one person or group of people is compromised for the benefit of another person or group, the organization or community is out of integrity. Appreciative leadership walks the essential line of integrity while balancing many diverse needs, akin to a juggler on a high wire.

Successful participatory planning requires relational integrity. When organization or community members are involved in a process they expect, and rightfully so, that their voices will be heard, their dreams will be considered and their lives will be enriched.

The values embedded in Appreciative Leadership are congruent with those of the field of participatory planning: engage all the stakeholders; use collaborative processes for inquiry, dialogue, learning and decision making; discover and build upon assets and strengths; and design programs, processes and practices that render social justice and environmental sustainability inevitable. Used together Appreciative Leadership and participatory planning can create a new foundation and hope for the future – a future that works for all.

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ⁱ Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A., The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change, Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

ⁱⁱ This definition is at the heart of the Appreciative Leadership Development Program created and facilitated by Corporation for Positive Change. For more information go to www.positivechange.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Thatchenkery, T., Metzger, C., Appreciative Intelligence, Berrett-Koehler, 2006.

^{iv} I was first introduced to the practice of “Ability Spotting” by Peter Lang and Elspeth McAdam, when I joined them to co-facilitate the KCC Summer School in 2005.